

Middle-aged hit by surge of potentially fatal skin cancer

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British men and women in their 50s have seen cases of malignant melanoma – the most dangerous form of skin cancer - soar from fewer than 500 each year to almost 2,000* since the end of the 1970s, [new figures](#) from Cancer Research UK show today.

The sharp increase means that more than five people a day in this age group are now diagnosed with a cancer that can prove fatal if diagnosed at a late stage.

[Melanoma](#) rates have more than tripled over the last 30 years,** rising from 7.5 cases of melanoma per 100,000 people in their 50s in Britain to 26.6 cases per 100,000.

And the latest available figures show that the total number of cases of [malignant melanoma](#) for all ages increased from around 12,100 in the UK in 2009 to around 12,800 in 2010 – a rise of more than five per cent.

The earlier cancer is diagnosed, the better chance people have to beat the disease - this is the goal of a major partnership between Cancer Research UK and Tesco, who are working together to raise awareness about the early signs of cancer, including [skin cancer](#).

The stark rise in melanoma rates highlights the importance of raising awareness of the signs and symptoms of skin cancer, encouraging people to visit their doctor promptly if they notice any unusual changes in their skin, and of the need to be safe in the sun.

As well as Tesco's in-store awareness campaign, which includes making Cancer Research UK leaflets about early signs of skin cancer easily accessible to millions of customers, Tesco aims to raise £10million this year to fund 32 early diagnosis research projects across the UK.

One of the projects benefiting from the Tesco Charity of the Year partnership is being carried out by a group of researchers at the University of Edinburgh who are finding new ways to help people recognise the signs of skin cancer earlier.

The team, led by Professor Jonathan Rees, want to see if using web-based images could be more successful at helping people recognise abnormalities than existing information.

Professor Jonathan Rees said: "People's idea of what skin cancer looks like is limited to three or four images that are widely used to promote awareness of the disease - but we don't think this goes far enough with helping people identify the problem and going to their doctor.

"With support from Tesco, the team in Edinburgh are working to use the internet and the potential it offers to access many images. It's a bit like bird spotting – using pictures as a guide to what malignant melanoma could look like and helping people make a better decision about seeing their doctor.

"It's worrying that melanoma rates are on the rise. But, if caught early, melanoma can be treated very successfully so if we can develop a better system of encouraging people to go to the doctor, this could potentially save a great deal of lives."

Glenys Shankland, 57, from Derby works as a customer assistant at Tesco. She was diagnosed with malignant melanoma in November 2010.

She said: “When my husband spotted the mole on the top of my left arm that was very itchy and red, I didn’t think anymore about it. I’m fair skinned and most of my family have red hair, so I try to be careful in the sun but I do enjoy being in my garden. I’ve been sunburnt a few times over the years but I never thought it would put me at risk of skin cancer.

“Fortunately I was at the right place at the right time. We’d just moved house and I needed to register with a new GP so I mentioned the mole then. If we hadn’t moved I probably wouldn’t have gone to the doctor as I didn’t think it looked like skin cancer.”

Glenys had surgery to remove the mole and tissue from around the area to make sure none of the cancer had spread. Because it was caught early she did not need further treatment, just regular check-ups.

She said: “That’s why the partnership between Cancer Research UK and Tesco means so much to me. It’s vital to we do all we can to spot cancer early so more lives can be saved. I know if my cancer hadn’t been caught early, things could have been very different for me. All too often cancer is detected further down the line when effective treatment becomes more difficult.”

In Great Britain thirty years ago malignant melanoma was the seventeenth most common cancer among people in their fifties, now it is the fifth most common cancer in this age group.

Sara Hiom, director of information at Cancer Research UK, said: “We know that cancer survival in the UK lags behind the best in Europe and this is likely because of a combination of many factors including late diagnosis.

“Our Spot Cancer Early campaign and partnership with Tesco are raising awareness of the difference early diagnosis can make to surviving

cancer.

“Melanoma is a largely preventable disease; people can reduce their chance of developing skin cancer in the first place if they protect their skin from sunburn. But it’s also important that people are aware of the warning signs for malignant melanoma.

“Look out for changes in size, shape, or colour of a mole, freckle or normal patch of skin - these should be reported to a GP without delay. In particular look for moles or freckles that are asymmetrical, with uneven colours or borders, larger than a pencil top eraser, are itchy or bleed.

“The chances are this won’t turn out to be cancer, but if it is, spotting it early could make a real difference to the outcome.”

More information: Rates and number of cases of melanoma based on average rates between 1979-81 and 2008-10. Cancer is the biggest cause of death in the UK. But looking at number of cases for specific types in particular age groups, can give relatively low numbers. This is often more of an issue in younger age groups as cancer is predominately a disease of the elderly. From year to year there will be a certain amount of random variation that occurs naturally and this variation is increased when considering types with smaller numbers. To ensure our statistics are as robust as possible we use three year averages to reduce this natural variation in the data.

*In 1979-1981 there were around 480 50-59 year-olds diagnosed with malignant melanoma in Great Britain. In 2008-2010 there were around 1,950.

**The percentage change in the age-standardised rate of malignant melanoma in people in their fifties in Great Britain is 256 per cent from 1979-1981 to 2008-2010.

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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